

Rolling Thunder

by Michael O'Brien

Dina Jimenez reached into the toolbox behind her for a 5-centimeter chip spanner. Her fingers couldn't find what she sought, and it took a few minutes before she remembered that it was probably still wedging shut that hatchway on Amalthea. With a weary sigh, she dug in a pocket of her thermal coverall and snapped open the screwdriver blade of an ancient Swiss Army knife.

Rusty Jones poked his head into the Juggernaut's cockpit through a huge rent in the ceramic armor. "I've cleared all the drive vents and straightened the vanes," he reported. "When you're ready to cut in some power, you shouldn't get any blowback."

"Nice work," approved Dina. "We'll make you a Cog in no time."

He adjusted his breather mask and looked around the inside of the combat vehicle dubiously. "Sure the two of us can get this thing running?"

"Why, this isn't even a challenge. There's got to be over eighty percent of it intact! Now, building one functional unit from two completely trashed Juggers and a box of parts from a shredded Gongen T.S.V.: that would be a challenge!"

He grabbed a box of melt-pegs and the driving tool from her toolbox and began re-fastening interior equipment to the brackets from which it had broken away. Despite his inexperience, his strong miner's hands moved surely. It was going to take a lot of blast to get the spherical Juggernaut off the bottom of this crevasse, and she was likely to bounce around a bit when it happened. "Sounds like experience talking. I've never seen a T.S.V. up close, though I've seen a lot of footage of them. The Gongs never bothered us much... seemed they were more interested in hitting the Earther operations here on Ganymede. I've seen a lot more SeeGeek equipment."

To her own surprise, the solidly athletic Cog woman laughed. "Is that what the youngsters are calling the Earth C.G.C. now?"

"Easier than 'Central Governance Corporation'. By the time you've gotten that out, they've overrun your positions and already started collecting taxes." He looked like a scrawny teen because he was one, recently out of a chromium mining colony in the southern hemisphere. Dina had picked him up because he said he was good with tools, and he hadn't disappointed yet.

"SeeGeeks, Gongs, Floaters, and Demons," she rattled off the nicknames for the other factions. "I love it. To answer your question, ore hound, I'll have you know I fired the very shot that knocked this pool ball into this corner pocket. Of course, the Blades swooped in and shot the back off my Boxer hovertank immediately afterward, but out here on these orbiting lumps of rock, there's often no time for salvage ops. Good thing, too, or we Cogs would never have any spare parts."

Rusty was quiet for a while as he ran new leads to the cockpit's power bus. "So who won your fight?"

She didn't want to answer immediately, which was an answer in itself. "See, our greatest strength out here is that we're independent and dispersed — if the Earthers blew up half the moons of the outer planets, they couldn't get us all. We Cogs build the best machines in the system, the Hellcats fly them like maniacs, the Cartel digs up info about the best places for us to hit, and the Nest and the Accord give us places to rest and lick our wounds. The one thing the Earthers have going for them is that they're organized and disciplined... they may be easy targets, but damn, they hit hard." Her voice was glum, with a bit of

defeated edge. It only lasted a moment before she perked up. "Still, a nice marching order and spit-polish on their boots won't help them when we keep coming back for more. They can't ever get us all." She pulled a piece of wire from a shattered com unit and stuck it between two exposed circuits. There was a spark, and the smell of burnt insulation; but the Juggernaut grumbled and shook, and lights burst into life across every console. She turned and grinned triumphantly at Rusty. "They may have the numbers, but we've got pure cussedness on our side."

Four separate alarm signals went off, but only for a second, before the power failed completely and the cockpit went dark again. Dina filled the sudden silence with a string of curses; then there was a metallic clang, and with a rising hum, everything lit up once again. She turned to look at Rusty, who bore a prybar and a smug expression; the conduit behind him bore a fresh prybar-shaped dent.

She shook her head and grinned at him. "I was right. You're definitely Cog material."

The spherical Juggernaut rolled and bounced across the bleak, rocky terrain of Ganymede. In the sky hung Jupiter, looking like an orange-and-vanilla striped jawbreaker candy meant for the child of a titanic god. Dina drove the ball-shaped tank, claiming prior experience. She held two joysticks controlling the forward or backwards movements of the port and starboard Grav tracks: rings of small tractor/pressor units that could grab even sheer vertical surfaces long enough to climb them for a short distance. They controlled the Jugger's fall during orbital drops, and it was said that a skilled driver could manage a 30-meter leap by timing the pulses just right.

Rusty took the gunner's seat; he was unskilled with the twin fusion cannons, but Dina had assured him he'd pick it up quickly enough. "Point-and-kill interface," she'd joked, and had even let him use a little of their precious battery reserve to try and pulverize a boulder or two along their uneven way. Normally, the Earther machine stabilized its operators with an internal Grav system, but it used a good chunk of power and Dina wasn't sure she had it working right, so it was on a low setting. Rusty didn't think his kidneys would ever talk to him again.

In fact, the whole situation was devilishly uncomfortable. Ganymede may have been partially terraformed, so that all anyone needed outside was a reprocessing breather and a thermal suit, but that didn't mean it wasn't damn cold. They hadn't had adequate means to patch the holed armor correctly, and the Juggernaut wasn't air- or heat-tight.

"Poetic justice," Dina mused.

"What was that?" he asked.

"You should have seen what these things did to us when they hit us for the first time. We didn't have anything that could touch them, only the first versions of the Boxer, and those were about as effective as a platoon of ice-cream trucks. These things were designed to go up against Gong NoBots, for Eris' sake."

"NoBots? The giant walking Gongen — ooof — machines?" The Jugger had dropped off a two-meter ledge, jostling them both abruptly.

"Sorry about that. Yeah, those NoBots gave the Earthers a good pasting the first time they showed up, so the natural Earther response was a crash research program with a kiloton of creds thrown at it, producing these things in one- to five-man sizes. The NoBots haven't faced Juggernauts yet, and I don't know if that's luck or good sense on the part of those crazy Martians. So instead, we got to be the field test." She shook her head sadly. "They brushed us aside like gnats."

She fell silent again. He suddenly felt a bit embarrassed, and covered it by placing his face in the targeting hood, working the twin grips, and vaporizing an inoffensive autocar-sized chunk of rock.

"We're heading toward one of the bigger mining setups," she said in answer to a question he hadn't asked yet. "Suddenly, both Earth and Mars are mighty interested in the big antigrav disposal wells. Don't know why they're curious about useless slag we're flinging into Father Jupiter, but anything they want to know about, we want to get in the way. We're gonna take the place back if we can, and bloody a few of their corporate noses if we can't. It's only poetic justice to use one of their own machines."

"Useless slag? I wonder. . . maybe that traginium stuff," he whispered.

"What?"

"The rumor mill on Southside's been abuzz with this the last week or three. It's an isotope of some super-heavy element, the kind of thing that ought to decay in a micro-second. Something about Jupiter's radiosphere and the natural conditions here on Ganymede stabilizes it."

"Oh, yeah? You're just a trove of interesting trivia, my miner friend. So, what's this stuff good for?"

"Not sure. The mill just said that if we could figure out how to extract it from our mining byproducts, there were people out there willing to pay a lot for it. They were playing with microgravity processes when I left home."

Her face twisted with a calculating smile. "How about that. Suddenly, we're really important gnats out here." She checked her power gauges, and angled the joysticks a little farther forward; the Juggernaut wobbled a bit until its internal gyroscope caught up with the higher speed. "We'll be meeting some friends soon. I think this is something they'll want to hear."

It wasn't long before they met up with a pair of Boxer hover tanks, a squad of minigun-armed ATVs and a ragged platoon of infantry with Jump packs. "I thought Jump infantry was a Gengen habit," commented Rusty.

"Yep, just like only Earthers ever use Juggernauts," answered Dina.

"Ah. Confusion to our enemies."

"May Eris, the Goddess of Chaos and Discord, smile upon us and pay plenty of attention to them," she intoned with wry reverence.

His map display changed, and he squinted at it. "We're getting close to the Shaeffer Plains mining facility," he noted. "Home of one of the biggest antigrav wells on Ganymede, and the current camp of a few dozen Earther garrison troops."

"I see it. I see the well, anyway. A spear of green light shooting into the sky."

"It ought to be yellow. They've definitely been fiddling with it."

"Turn on the jamming generator. No need for them to see us coming."

"Okay. Uhh. . . which one is the. . ."

"I don't know — you did the wiring back there!"

Rusty punched out a key sequence experimentally. The lights flickered and dimmed, and a neon green glow shone through the windows.

"Rusty! This thing has a shield!" Dina yelped.

More alarms went off, and their attention swung back to their instruments. "They know we're here," Rusty shouted. "I have a pair of Blades coming in high!"

She glanced skyward at the growing dots of the pair of STOL attack fighters. "So get rid of them!"

He grabbed the targeting grips and squeezed them tight. Just outboard of the spinning Grav tracks, panels slid aside and a pair of fusion cannon slid out. Their muzzles glowed green with pre-ignition charge, and spears of nova-hot plasma lanced out as Rusty thumbed the triggers. One shot missed a Blade entirely, and the second grazed a tail fin, doing little more than cosmetic damage. Return fire was a lot more accurate, and the Juggernaut shook as the shield dispersed the blast. Power levels dropped briefly as the Jugger's systems tried to recover from the shock.

"You'll have to do a little better!" Dina shouted.

"I don't play video games, I'm new at this!"

His second attempt worked a little better. The Juggernaut's fire-control computer managed to lock on to one of the Blades, and his shots shredded the fighter's engine turbines. One of the Cog ATVs had sprouted a missile launcher, and an Clanton grav missile imploded under the cockpit of the other Blade, crushing it.

"Forget stealth! They know we're here now!" cried Dina, shoving both joysticks full forward against their stops. It was a good thing Rusty didn't have to target anything for a while, as the Juggernaut bounced forward like an angry soccer ball. Missiles and plasma cannon fire rained down from an emplacement on a high hill to their left, but return blasts from the two Boxer hover tanks quieted those guns, and a half-dozen jump infantry rocketed up to finish the job. One of the ATV drivers was lost to anti-personnel fire as the Maverick force rounded a bend, and the others answered with streams of armor-piercing discarding-sabot rounds, ripping up three squads of Earther infantry.

The Juggernaut had slowed a bit, and was on a smoother surface, so Rusty began hitting things he shot at again. "How we doing?" he asked as he lit up an Earther armored personnel carrier.

"We're less than a kilometer from the mining works," Dina answered. "This has been a cinch. I can't believe they left such green troops to defend this place after everything they threw at us to take it."

A large, ominous shadow blocked out a chunk of Jupiter's light. Pieces broke off of that shadow, and fell to the ground... round pieces, with bands of grav glow on each side, and pre-ignition flashes to match.

"Oh, no... a tender full of heavy combat Juggers," Dina moaned. "I was expecting stiff resistance, but not this."

"Like what we're in?"

"Worse, this one's just infantry support. Those things —"

She never had a chance to finish, as the half-dozen falling spheres didn't wait to land before opening up on the outmatched Mavericks. Missiles corkscrewed in, and a Boxer went up in a fireball before its crew knew they were a target. Plasma fire cooked jump troops, and one of the Earther vehicles angled to land atop an ATV. Rusty looked away from the results of that landing. "We've got to get out of here."

"The hell with that," Dina growled. "Keep firing."

"But —"

"Keep firing or die! There isn't a Door Number 3!"

Rusty began blasting at anything that rolled. The other Boxer was retreating in a cloud of smoke it wasn't meaning to emit. The remaining few ATVs had disappeared, and panicked infantry ran back and forth across the battlefield as they tried to stay out of the way of the Earthers. He leaned on the triggers, but it seemed as though he was just scratching the paint on the giant machines.

"They aren't using any shields!" Dina shouted. On the screens before her, the mining station loomed close, a cluster of buildings in a loose circle around tunnel entrances and the disposal well.

"They don't need to! That armor's impenetrable." A tongue of fire licked from a gash in the skin of one of Rusty's opponents: the first sign of real damage he'd managed to cause. He looked at his cannon status display and saw that they were nearly drained. "We're not going to get much more from this thing, Dina. We need to get out of here!" She began cursing vilely, swinging their Juggernaut around as their shield flickered with more and more powerful impacts. It looked like the shield was designed to disrupt energy blasts. A slug-thrower like a railgun could punch through it, but nobody used those any more.

Suddenly, the light from the antigrav well flared into painful brightness. Rusty knew the sign, it was the daily maintenance blast, clearing fouled injectors and re-calibrating the well's alignment equipment. What he hadn't expected was the arcs of voltage that leapt from every metallic surface in the cockpit. Dina got her hands caught in one discharge and abandoned the joysticks, screaming with the pain of the electrical burns. There was a nauseating surge, and the Juggernaut was caught in the eddies of magnetic and electrical energy emanating from the column of green light. The spherical tank was flung high into the thin atmosphere of Ganymede.

Two figures trudged slowly, painfully away from a cracked, partially smashed metal ball several kilometers away from the Shaeffer Plains mining facility.

"Quick thinking, kid. . . cranking up the internal Grav cushioning system before we hit."

"Thanks. I guess now we know why the Earthers don't use their shields much around the wells."

"Yeah. I might even know a Cartel snoop who'd pay us a bit to learn that."

"We going to get that well back?"

"You bet your ass. Maybe not today. . . but when we've got a little more than a single patched-up Juggernaut."

And far overhead, too far for either Maverick to see, a bulbous blue-and-grey alien shape headed purposefully toward the green pillar of light that stabbed into the sky.